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'THIS VOICE'

The poetry of knowing and not knowing

This essay is concerned with how poetry—reading it, writing it, and adapting it—relies on a dialectic between knowing and not knowing, a flickering movement between understanding and ignorance that is central to the production of poetry and its effects. To illustrate this, I discuss my poem, 'This Voice', and its subsequent adaptation into what I call a 'poetry soundtrack', a form of digital audio poetry employing poetry, music, and sound design. The essay illustrates the centrality of the knowing/not-knowing dialectic to poetry by considering the following with regard to my works: the thematics of nescience; the liminal and virtual space of interpretation and play (the latter as theorised by D.W. Winnicott); 'nocturnal poetics'; and sampling (both sonic and lexical).

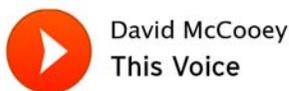
'This Voice'

It goes without saying
that it sounds like your voice.
But is it yours? And if
not yours, then whose?

It could be the voice-over in a
film; not a war movie, but a
tale of childhood and
disillusion that begins and ends

not with voices, but with
insects starting up at night,
phantom traffic, and the
honk of a distant goods train. (McCooey 2012a: 264)

'This Voice'



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I am concerned here with how poetry—reading it, writing it, and adapting it—relies on a dialectic between knowing and not knowing, a flickering movement between understanding and ignorance that is central to the production of poetry and its effects. To illustrate this, I will discuss my poem, ‘This Voice’, and its subsequent adaptation by me into what I call a ‘poetry soundtrack’, a form of digital audio poetry employing poetry, music, and sound design. Both versions of ‘This Voice’ thematise the knowing/not-knowing dialectic, and each tells us something about how poetry occupies the liminal and virtual space of both interpretation and play (the latter as theorised by D.W. Winnicott), both of which rely on the knowing/not-knowing dialectic. Both versions of ‘This Voice’, but especially the audio version, employ a ‘nocturnal poetics’, by which I mean that particularly literary thematisation of ‘other’, liminal, ways of knowing (and not knowing) that contrast to rational, ‘daytime’ ways of thinking. Lastly, each version illustrates something of how the knowing/not-knowing dialectic relates to the issue of sampling (both sonic and lexical), that use of the already-known to produce the previously-unknown. Taken together, these points illustrate the centrality of the knowing/not-knowing dialectic to poetic practice (including interpretation and adaptation). The audio version of ‘This Voice’ appears on my album *Outside broadcast* (2013), and while it overtly thematises the knowing/not-knowing dialectic under consideration here, other pieces from that album could be seen as equally relevant to this discussion, given that they all—to a greater or lesser degree—mobilise themes of knowing and nescience, all employ a ‘nocturnal poetics’, and all draw attention to the issue of sampling in some way.

I am not concerned here with the knowledge that poetry could be said to produce or resist. Nor am I concerned with the discursive power of poetic knowledge, or of the sociological outcomes of poets and poetry being associated with certain kinds of knowledge (or even wisdom). Rather, I am interested in the ways in which the writing, interpretation, and adaptation of poetry involves what I am calling the

knowing/not-knowing dialectic. In this respect, I am following the lead of Andrew Bennett, whose *Ignorance: literature and agnology* sees nescience as ‘part of the narrative and other force of literature, part of its performativity, and indeed as an important aspect of its thematic focus—what literary texts are “about”’ (2009: 1).

Thematising Knowing and Nescience in ‘This Voice’

As the title of my poem makes clear, the concept of ‘voice’—so troublingly persistent in theories of lyric poetry—is central to ‘This Voice’. The demonstrative pronoun draws attention to the unstable or paradoxical status of voice in lyric poetry, since it immediately raises questions regarding which voice is being evoked. Is it the author’s? The reader’s? A fictional character’s? The real voice of performance? A recorded voice? (It is, of course, both all and none of these things.)

The title, then, announces the doubleness that is key to the knowing/not-knowing dialectic. The poem’s opening line—‘It goes without saying’—continues the trope of doubleness and is explicitly concerned with issues of knowing. On the one hand, true knowledge might be thought of as that which ‘goes without saying’, while on the other hand knowledge is conventionally understood as that which can be conveyed to others, that which can be ‘said’. Doubleness is also seen in the fact that the line is both ‘literary speech’ in the context of the poem, and demotic speech, sampled from everyday life. Its purpose is that special form of doubleness, paradox. While a voice clearly cannot ‘go without saying’, since a voice requires voicing, in this context it does ‘go without saying’, as the voice is the ‘unvoiced voice’ of textuality. (In the audio version paradox remains, since that which ‘goes without saying’ is being said.)

Doubleness continues in the second line (‘it sounds like your voice’), since ‘sounds’ is polysemous. ‘To sound’ means to make a noise, but it also means to announce something, and to measure or test something. The sound or sounding of ‘your voice’ (with the second-person address simultaneously suggesting poet, interlocutor, and audience) is therefore replete with multiplicity and paradox. It announces without announcing, makes a noise that cannot be heard, and tests that which cannot be tested. The doubleness of the poem engages binary oppositions common to lyric poetry—presence and absence, speech and silence, the apparent and the hidden—through a continual instability regarding knowledge that is made clear in the third line, which asks if the voice is ‘your’ voice, radically undermining the apparent certainty of the title and first line.

Such deconstructive moves are, of course, far from uncommon in contemporary lyric poetry. The poem takes a more explicitly ‘postmodern’ turn in the second stanza with its strategic confusion of the real and the representational. The environmental images that end the poem—insects, traffic, and a train—in fact emanate from a putatively filmic, rather than ‘real’, realm. (The fact that these ‘images’ are sonic rather than visual further complicates matters.) This move to the imagistic (sonic) world of cinema, and by association the night, intensifies the knowing/not-knowing dialectic by employing a poetics of the uncanny. The poem’s last three lines—‘insects starting up at night, / phantom traffic, and the / honk of a distant goods train’—evoke both the everyday and a nocturnal poetics of the uncanny, with the uncanny being a form of our dialectic (since the uncanny is the disquieting interplay between the familiar and the unfamiliar, or the known and the unknown). While we recognise the sounds of insects, traffic, and a goods train as being inherently quotidian (and therefore knowable), the context places them in a far more ambiguous, unknowable, light.

This imagistic development evokes a dream-like process, as per Maurice Blanchot’s discussion in *The space of*

literature of dream as a domain of incessant resemblances:

The dream touches the region where pure resemblance reigns. Everything there is similar: each figure is another one, is similar to another and to yet another, and this last to still another. One seeks the original model, wanting to be referred to a point of departure, an initial revelation, but there is none. The dream is the likeness that refers eternally to likeness. (1982: 268)

This interminable process is akin to that of literature, whereby writing and representation are endless and self-generating. As we will see, this incessant process is related to the open-ended nature of creating something new in the knowing/not-knowing dialectic.

This unending dream-like process could also be seen as being thematised in the poem, since the poem, despite its brevity, is one of continual transformation and modulation: 'your voice' quickly dissolves into the voice-over of a movie, the ghostly sounds of night, and the 'honk of a distant goods train' (an image that confuses natural and mechanical, human and animal). Or, to put it another way, the poem—which begins with a putatively present and singular voice—quickly moves to the disembodied voices of the movies, and then ends with the voiceless voicings of the night: cars, insects, a train. These latter sounds have a teasing relationship to what Foucault (borrowing from Blanchot) describes as 'the endless murmuring we call literature' (1977: 60), a murmuring that arises from our voices modulating the 'disquieting sound that announces from the depths of language'.

Poetry, Knowing, & Interpretation

The above is, at any rate, one attempt at explicating the poem with regards to the knowing/not-knowing dialectic, though perhaps one that—like some of its sources—simply restates the metaphorical power of poetic effects in different, but equally metaphorical, terms. Let us turn now, then, more explicitly to the question 'What does "This Voice", or poetry generally, have to do with knowing and not-knowing?' The complexity of knowing may be highlighted by quickly comparing it with other terms of cognition, mood, and affect: attending, interpreting, understanding, experiencing, perceiving, feeling, desiring. Lyric poetry deals in all of these, but at least since the Romantics it has also often been programmatically concerned with those states that explicitly resist knowing as rational thought: evanescent moods (such as sexual desire), dynamic or complex emotions (such as love and grief), and liminal states (such as dream and hypnagogia). All of these, notably, are categories that proved resistant to the Western philosophical tradition of aligning knowledge with abstraction and disembodied ideality. In other words, poetry, and certain types of prose literature, tackles those (embodied) experiences that resist conventional ideas of knowing: moods and feelings, bewilderment, anxiety, dreams, inspiration.

In this context it is perhaps inevitable to evoke Keats's concept of 'negative capability', glossed in part by Keats as a poet's ability to be 'in uncertainties, Mysteries, [and] doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason' (2002: 60). This is, among other things, a canonical expression of the relationship between poetry and those categories of experience that resist knowing. One key category here is poetic composition itself. As any poet would know, writing poetry is not simply a matter of 'knowing' what one has to say and transcribing that knowledge. As Susan Stewart writes in *The poet's freedom*, 'a work of art does not communicate something that is already understood. The work is a determined outcome built from an inchoate, merely suggestive, beginning' (2011: 55-56). Commonplace though this idea is, it is worth considering some of the implications of this condition of not-knowing in poetic composition. As Timothy

Clark writes in *The theory of inspiration*, ‘The act of inscription not only produces effects which immediately, as their very condition of appearance, escape the intentional grasp of the consciousness that wrote them, it may do so, on some occasions, in ways that are themselves “creative” or surprising in a valuable way’ (1997: 19). In other words, the act of poetic creativity is immediately one of interpretation. Literary texts, of which poems are paradigmatic examples, generate meaning from within this dialectic between creation and interpretation, or not-knowing and knowing. Lyric poems, such as ‘This Voice’, repeatedly illustrate this by drawing attention to the temporal ambiguity of the text (when is ‘now?’), the inherent ventriloquism of enunciation (who is ‘speaking?’), and the interplay between subjectivity and otherness (to which phantasmal audience is this phantasmal ‘I’ speaking?).

It should be clear by now, then, that the knowing/not-knowing dialectic is profoundly associated with things central to poetry, especially those key figures and techniques used to alienate ordinary speech into poetic speech: metaphor, the uncanny, symbol, and defamiliarisation. This latter concept (in which the ‘automatism of perception’ is overcome by the difficult, estranging language of poetry [see Shklovsky 1998: 18]) is akin to various Romantic and post-Romantic theories of poetry that rely on concepts such as ‘wonder’, ‘chaos’, ‘power’, and ‘renewal’. Bennett’s reading of Shelley’s ‘A Defence of Poetry’, for instance, ends in this territory: ‘poetry offers us ignorance of the world we (thought we) knew, so that we can know it again as if it was new to us, know it as a new, unknown, world of wonder’ (2009: 74).

The Space of Play

One key model of the know/not-knowing dialectic that can illustrate this interpenetration of the world and the poet can be found in D.W. Winnicott’s *Playing and reality* (1971). Winnicott sees play as a ‘potential space’—also termed ‘a third area’ (2005: 138) or ‘intermediate zone’ (2005: 141)—linking and separating individuals and environments. In ‘Playing: A Theoretical Statement’, Winnicott postulates the potential space of playing as a development of what he elsewhere calls transitional phenomena (those actions and things, such as babbling, thumb-sucking, and teddy bears, that allow transition from subjective reliance on the mother to objective independence). In other words, playing (and subsequently creativity) employs a virtual space that is neither the inner world nor external reality, but something mediating the two (2005: 55): ‘This area of playing is not inner psychic reality. It is outside the individual, but it is not the external world’ (2005: 69). This space paradoxically links and separates inside and outside, subject and object. Winnicott insists on this paradoxical nature of play, of it involving the interplay of separateness and union, inner and external realities. This intermediate zone is by definition intersubjective and dialogic (even when it does not appear so), since it is a space that connects and separates subjects. It is no anodyne space, because it allows for both creative and destructive fantasies. It is, as Malcolm Bowie writes, ‘full of promise and danger’ (2000: 14).

Like the writing poet, the playing child inhabits an area that

cannot be easily left, nor can it easily admit intrusions ... Into this play area the child gathers objects or phenomena from external reality and uses these in the service of some sample derived from inner or personal reality. Without hallucinating the child puts out a sample of dream potential and lives with this sample in a chosen setting of fragments from external reality. (2005: 69)

Play, like creativity, is not dream or hallucination. That is, we know we are not dreaming or hallucinating when we write or read a poem, however much those things might conjure up dream-like or hallucinatory

effects. Nor is it merely the distraction of daydreaming. It is exciting and precarious, the one deriving from the other. As Winnicott states, the excitement of playing ‘derives *not* from instinctual arousal but from the precariousness that belongs to the interplay in the child’s mind of that which is subjective (near-hallucination) and that which is objectively perceived (actual, or shared reality)’ (2005: 70). Play, like creativity, is precarious and satisfying. It can tolerate anxiety, but it can also be destroyed by it (2005: 70).

Theorising in this way is useful here since it conceptualises writing generally (and poetry in particular) as occupying a liminal space, a space that can be best understood as generating something new in the interplay between knowing and not-knowing. Such paradoxical interplay is precarious, satisfying, and allows for a considerable degree of anxiety. Winnicott himself comments on how this paradoxical interplay between the subject and the world, between separateness and union, has implications for creative writers. In ‘The Location of Cultural Experience’, he argues that ‘The interplay between originality and the acceptance of tradition as the basis for inventiveness seems to me to be just one more example, and a very exciting one, of the interplay between separateness and union’ (2005: 134). Originality and tradition is in turn, I would argue, another way of figuring the knowing/not-knowing dialectic.

There is a final Winnicottian issue that promises insights for this discussion about poetry and knowing. Winnicott repeatedly insists that the paradox of the potential space both linking and separating should be accepted. Such acceptance can be of use to poets and readers of poetry since it can stop both from too quickly trying to resolve the problems of creativity: anxiety, disappointment, obscurity, and so on. Winnicott believed that, in life and psychoanalysis, time was necessary for individuals to come to discover what they needed (‘growth takes time’, 2005: 202). Adam Phillips’ gloss on this stance with regard to the role of interpretation in psychoanalysis can equally apply to the poet’s use of language: ‘It is there to be used, in the way Winnicott described the Transitional Object as being used, not revered, copied, or complied with. And because it is essentially transitional to an unknown destination, it could never be conclusive’ (2007: 143). In other words, poetry, like play, is both communicative and open-ended.

Nocturnal Poetics and Sampling

Lastly, I will consider the audio version of ‘This Voice’—which I produced using a Digital Audio Workstation (DAW)—to develop two related points that were briefly raised earlier: a nocturnal poetics, and literature’s incessant (or open-ended) sampling of speech and writing. Like the original poem, the audio version came out of an inchoate beginning (or sequence of beginnings) that was supported by the place of play posited by Winnicott. (In addition, this paper could be thought of as a further iteration of my attempt to ‘know’ my own work, this time with the added interpenetration of ‘original’ text and adaptation, in the form of the poetry soundtrack. This iterative nature of interpretation is clearly related to the ceaseless ‘murmuring’ of literary texts.)

The relationship between poetry and sound, and poetry and audio recording, is a complex one, and one that cannot be addressed here. Certainly, works such as *The sound of poetry, The poetry of sound* (2009), edited by Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin, and *Sound states: innovative poetics and acoustical technologies* (1997), edited by Adelaide Morris, draw attention to the complexity of these relationships. As I argue in my essay on sounded poetry, ‘Fear of Music: Sounded Poetry and the “Poetry Soundtrack”’ (2012), the relationship between recorded poetry and music has been generally ignored by such studies, placing sounded poetry that employs music in a no-man’s-land between avant-garde ‘sound poetry’ and documentary-style recordings of poetry readings. The genre that I term the ‘poetry soundtrack’ is a form that deliberately draws attention to the usually-ignored links between so-called ‘popular’ and ‘avant garde’ aesthetics. If the link between poetry

and music has often, at least in the critical literature, been associated with the popular and the kitsch, my desire to employ music in this context is a desire to 'know' sounded poetry in a different way.

The completed poetry soundtrack of 'This Voice' also illustrates a number of features of me coming to 'know' my text more clearly, though in this case, once again, such a process is defined more by chance and the incessant, associative, sometimes subconscious, process of interpretation than something we might call 'knowledge'. This is seen in the way the poetry soundtrack employs a number of audio samples from television and film. These samples open and close the piece with the words 'Good evening' and a somewhat-indistinct 'Good night'. Such samples further the text's confusion of the visual and the aural (an interpretation I only reached in the writing of this essay), and further emphasise its nocturnal poetics, that virtual liminal space which, akin to Winnicott's place of play, engages the knowing/not-knowing dialectic to produce poetic effects. 'This Voice' ventures into the nocturnal, and indeed ends there, because the poem is concerned with a form of knowing that we might call nocturnal: the threshold and liminal states where the foundational form of knowledge, knowledge of the self's existence, begins to fray, leading to the loss of knowledge and self-hood that occurs in sleep and the process of dreaming (a process which, like poetry and creativity generally, undoes simple distinctions between subject and object, self and other, knowing and not-knowing).

The nocturnal poetics of the poem draws attention to the liminal state that Peter Schwenger discusses in his study of the surprisingly large body of literature that represents the liminal spaces between waking and sleeping, *At the borders of sleep*. Schwenger argues that literature generally is inherently liminal, neither clearly one thing nor the other, expressing and evoking in its readers and writers a process that is neither 'fully conscious and rational' nor 'an immersion into dream' (2012: xii). As Schwenger's discussion shows, writing that is thematically concerned with the liminal space between sleeping and waking powerfully unsettles routine ways of knowing, and produces disquieting (or, one might add, marvellous) effects through what Mallarmé calls the work's 'resonant disappearance' (quoted in Schwenger 2012: 140). Just as Winnicott emphasises playing's open-ended nature, Schwenger sees the 'experiment' of such modern literature as something that is 'never concluded or conclusive, yielding a piece of significant information that can then be classified among the things we know. Rather, we inhabit endlessly, ceaselessly, interminably—these are Blanchot's repeated terms—a realm in which "there is no meaning yet" but in which meaning is in the interminable process of becoming' (2012: 141). This 'interminable' process can equally be thought of as 'interpretation' or, in Winnicottian terms, play (processes, as stated earlier, that employ the knowing/not-knowing dialectic). It is also central to understanding a 'nocturnal poetics' of literature, by adverting to the way that writing moves away from 'daylight' ways of thinking that presuppose the subject's coherence, and the material world's stability, to a nocturnal mode of thinking akin to the interminable thought of insomnia, hypnagogia, and dreams, processes marked by paradox and the endless movement of association and possibility.

Both versions of my poem seek a resonant disappearance, in part through the metaphorical and actual resonance of voice and sound. The voices and sounds in my poetry soundtrack work within the knowing/not-knowing dialectic in significant ways. Firstly, the music and sound design rely significantly on audio samples. Samples from a number of films and television programmes, as mentioned, are included in the piece. These samples were chosen with little or no regard to their sources; rather they were chosen for their 'inherent' resonance, or rather the degree to which their potential resonance could be realised through recontextualisation. In addition, the musical content (such as the percussion, electric piano, and strings) is largely produced using sample libraries, while the more 'nocturnal' musical sounds were produced using the

sampling resynthesis of Izotope's Iris virtual synthesizer. My own voice is also to some degree a sequence of samples, given that it is not a single performance as such, but an edited and processed assemblage, 'comping' an apparently seamless performance together through the editing of multiple 'takes'. This is possible because the DAW makes sound akin to text, something that can be endlessly copied, edited, recontextualised, and modified. (For further discussion on DAWs and the production of sounded poetry see McCooey 2012b.)

This use of vocal samples adds an additional 'text' to the poem, producing a dialogue that was impossible to predict on the basis of the original text. Ironic contrasts and 'impossible' interchanges between my voice and the voices of the ghostly samples (such as the 'I don't know' after 'then whose?') are part of this dialogue. These voices also, like the polysemous text, are surprisingly unstable, quick to shed the features that we believe we 'know' about them. For example, 'I don't know' becomes a simple 'no', thanks to the DAW's ability to non-destructively copy and cut the relevant audio file. The phrase 'There is a tendency for the mind to wander' (which pointedly follows 'a tale of childhood and disillusion') jumps across the stereo field from left to right at the point at which the speaker says the word 'wander'. The samples sometimes reappear in ironically different contexts. 'Nice to see you again', for example, appears after the phrase 'not a war movie'.

Everything we think we know can potentially be reconfigured in unpredictable ways. While this is quite obvious with regard to the audio samples, the text itself similarly shows the endlessly reconfigurable nature of what we think we know, since words themselves, as text or speech, are also samples, things that we inherit and do not invent. They are akin to audio samples in how we can endlessly 'play' with these samples, forming previously unknown sentences and words and works out of existing words, idiomatic phrases, and literary forms and genres. As Herschel Farbman suggests in *The other night*, with regard to the novels of Samuel Beckett, this condition is what links us not only as writers and readers but as speakers of any given language:

We are bound to each other, in the odd logic of Beckett's fictions, by our common absence at the origin of the words we speak to each other—bound to each other in our alienation from the words we speak. These words we speak are never all ours, and this, much more than any unspeakable presence or communion or romance of a human family, connects us. (2008: 20)

The closing sounds of 'This Voice' suggest something of this condition. The ordinary experience of a nightly valediction ('good night') is transformed in the interminable nocturnal sound of crickets and the mysterious disappearing resonance of music. This voice, and the others that inhabit the poem, are ones that we both know and don't know, their words harking back to an unknowable original (in text or in sound), incorporated into the endlessly interpretable text that came about through the poet's creative mix of knowing and not-knowing.

As Bennett writes in *Ignorance*, 'It is something of an open secret—outside of the academic study of literature, at least—that not knowing is, for a poet, as important as knowing' (2009: 228). As Bennett points out (and as Susan Stewart illustrated earlier), contemporary poets repeatedly avow knowledge of their own work. This trope of poetic nescience has, as Bennett argues, opposing political implications. On the one hand, poets claiming 'professional ignorance'

constitutes the danger of Romantic authorialism ... since it can so easily lead to the vatic conception of the author or poet as endowed with mysterious authority invested in them through inspiration—the poet is a ‘legislator’, even if not properly acknowledged as such. But this condition of authorship is also the poet’s vulnerability, his fallibility, the fragility and uncertainty of his vision. (2009: 237)

The fallibility and fragility of her or his vision takes us back to Winnicott, whose conception of play allows the subject to project onto the world, but not in such a way that her or his projections are confused with reality and therefore become coercive or violent (in the way the law or a decree can). In this respect, and it is one that few poets or commentators seem to acknowledge, poets know very well the limits of their fragile play. Poetry, like any creative act, does not seek compliance, but rather the further interpretive play of reading and further writing. *This* voice will now dissolve into that process.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David McCooney is a prize-winning poet and critic. He is also a sound artist and musician. *Outside broadcast*, his album of 'poetry soundtracks' (original poetry, music, and sound design), was released as a digital download in 2013. Work from that album appeared in the 'Poems, Places, and Soundscapes' international exhibition of digitally produced sound and poetry in the Cube Gallery in England in 2014. His poetry soundtracks have been broadcast on Radio National (including 'The Music Show' and 'Poetica' programmes), 3RRR, and elsewhere, and they have been published in CD editions of *Going down swinging*, and online in *Axon* and *Cordite*. His print collections of poetry include *Blister Pack* (2005), which won the Mary Gilmore Award, and was shortlisted for four other major awards, and *Outside* (2011), which was shortlisted for a Queensland Literary Award and was a Finalist of the Melbourne Prize for Literature's 'Best Writing Award' in 2012. David is the Deputy General Editor of the prizewinning *Macquarie PEN anthology of Australian literature* (2009), and his essays and reviews on Australian poetry and life writing have been widely published nationally and internationally. He is Personal Chair at Deakin University in Geelong, where he lives.